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ABSTRACT

This paper provides information for the study of civic development in relation to education in Thailand. The author has spent the last 35 years as a student of Thailand. The paper is based on personal socio-anthropological observations as well as a review of literature as it pertains to value systems, civic and moral development, and education. The paper places Thailand under the following definition of civic education: societies with established organized religions will emphasize religious instruction in the curriculum. It illustrates how civic development is infused throughout Thai educational life in both formal and informal ways through the vehicle of the established Buddhist faith. The paper concludes that as Western ideas and approaches are implemented within the educational system, the Buddhist emphasis on the individual and the traditional acceptance of a hierarchical social structure might well come in conflict with Western intellectual curiosity and social mobility. Contains 22 references. (BT)

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Civic Development in Thailand: A Beginning Look at its Relationship to Formal and Informal Education

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Background

Muang Thai (the land of the free) with a population of some fifty-five million people, covers an area the size of Texas in the part of the world we refer to as Southeast Asia. It is surrounded by Myanmar (Burma), Laos, Cambodia, and Malaysia. It is the only country in this area that has not been colonized by the West.

This paper should be seen as an attempt to provide background information for the study of civic development in relation to education in Thailand. The word "background" should be especially stressed. The author has spent the last thirty-five years as an "on-again, off-again" student of Thailand. From 1964 to 1966 I served as one of the first Peace Corps Volunteer English teachers in rural Thailand. From 1968 to 1970, as a Foreign Service member, I worked in Northeast Thailand to support the establishment of a village-based, community development-oriented radio station (Baker, 1984). Over the next twenty-five years I continued contact with my adopted country through reading, writing, and communication with old friends. I maintained my Thai language skills (mostly through good Thai restaurants) and have stayed involved with Thai student groups through university teaching. In 1985 I returned to Thailand as a Fulbright Professor to help build a distance teaching model in support of Thai village-based teachers attaining their baccalaureate degrees (Baker, 1989). My life-long educational commitment to studying moral education has naturally led to

its international dimensions. These dimensions, as outlined in this paper, are based upon my own socio-anthropological observations as well as a review of the literature as it may pertain to value systems, civic and moral development and education. I hope, in the future, to have this background take me deeper into the study of civic education in Thailand, especially in terms of teacher education.

Definitions

In studying civic education around the world we find countries falling under one of the following four types:

1. Countries with radical regimes will de-emphasize both moral and religious education in preference to broad issues in social science and for emphases on participation in school as a matter of citizenship.
2. Societies with established organized religions will emphasize religious instruction in the curriculum.
3. Societies built around a tradition of collective authority, but without an established religion, will emphasize moral education in schools.
4. Emerging societies and states will tend to construct distinctive programs of moral education apart from mainstream instruction in civics or social life. (Cummings, 1988)

Thailand clearly follows the model defined in number two. This paper will, therefore, illustrate how civic development is infused throughout Thai educational life in both formal and informal ways through the vehicle of the established Buddhist faith.

Informal Civic Development: An Overview of Thai Village Life

The majority of Thai people today, like their families before them, are rice farmers. They still live in small, self-sustaining villages. Cluster villages

combine with strip villages to provide rural settlement patterns. These clusters are usually low-lying areas where there is reasonable assurance that a fair crop of rice can be raised. In most provinces rice accounts for more than 80 percent of the land under cultivation. Farmers produce practically all their own food. They catch fish, build their own houses, and make their own household articles.

Villagers look to the government for material and technical assistance such as rice subsidies and well drilling. There is a general feeling among villagers that the government has a legal and moral obligation to render this assistance. Villagers themselves are willing to contribute towards this goal. This would largely be in the form of labor. There is no single village model for solving group problems or resolving common needs; nor is their any single village leader. In most cases there are several (Young, 1966). Official matters that affect the entire community begin in the provincial governor's office. On the village level, however, they are the primary concern and responsibility of the headman, who in turn usually seeks the counsel of the village elders. If the matter pertains to education, the school principal and teachers are also consulted. If necessary a mass meeting is called by the headman to inform the people of the official matter under consideration. The effective implementation of any group decision affecting the entire community usually requires the assistance of the local abbot and other senior priests who stimulate villagers to collective action (deYoung, 1963).

Generally there are somewhere between three and five numerically superior and politically dominant extended family units in the village setting. The heads of these units form the nucleus of the secular leadership. They are both a source of strength and a potential source of conflict in community affairs. As basic socio-political-economic units they serve as multi-purpose problem-solving entities as well. The members of these units practice mutual aid by helping each other in farming, house building, financial, and personal matters. Group cooperation in the form of mutual exchange of labor in farming and house

building may also involve village units larger than the household and extended family. This unit, which is activated only when the need arises, is not formally organized and has no permanent set of officers (Philips, 1965).

A village usually has several standing committees each with a different function. These include, above all, the temple and school committees. Many of the same individuals, such as the headman, school principal, and certain influential village elders, tend to serve on all village committees.

Under a centralized form of government the public institutions in the region have little autonomy and are closely guided in their activities by policies and detailed directives formulate by the various ministries in Bangkok. Likewise, the organization of local institutions conforms to a structure, which is uniform for the entire country. While general policies governing public services are directed toward the attainment of objectives of national interest, it is also recognized that different regions of Thailand have special problems and needs which require modifications in approach or emphasis (Mosel, 1963). Observers have pointed out defects in the administrative structure which impede economic development and many government officials are aware of the need for improvement (Mosel, 1957). In Thailand, history has shown it requires time and patience to foster this educational process within the bureaucratic structure.

Informal Civic Development: The Place of Religion

Thais are extremely comfortable with their Buddhist religion (Wilson, 1962). Mahayana Buddhism came to Thailand as early as the third century BC and from the thirteenth century onwards has been replaced by Theravada Buddhism as the adopted religion. An understanding of its basic tenants is necessary to understand how they so strongly apply to moral development in the Thai personality and therefore also apply to Thai education.

The basis of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, is that life consists of suffering; suffering comes from desire; ending of desire leads to the ending of suffering and rebirth. This outcome can come about by the pursuit of the Eightfold Path; right understanding, right purpose, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, responsiveness to truth and contemplation. This Path leads to the Five Moral Precepts; no killing, no stealing, no adultery, no lying, no drinking intoxicants. Underlying these Precepts are Three Principles; that nothing is permanent, life consists of suffering and the soul is an illusion. Each of our lives is controlled by karma (each action has a reward or penalty now or in another life). The ultimate end of all this is nirvana (extinction, nothingness). The aims of Buddhist education, therefore, were essentially ethical and religious. This should not be seen to be a narrow viewpoint, however, since religion permeates the whole of Thai society and for that reason could be called national.

This faith in traditional religion has saved the Thai from self-criticism and has given them a matter-of-fact approach to life. Thai villagers face life head-on each and every day. They are not given to flights of imagination. The closest things to psychological literature resulting from these fundamental orientations are religious essays, schoolbooks on morality, and satirical fiction and poetry.

Informal Civic Development: The Thai Personality

The major literature on Thai personality tells us much about the inner workings of a Thai villager. The most famous culture-personality study on Thailand is without a doubt Thai Culture and Behavior (Benedict, 1943). This study is especially significant since it was one of the first attempts to penetrate the Thai character. In it she deals with the traditional background of Thailand, its religion and its occupants' adult life. In the second part of her study, she speaks of Thai children and goes into characteristics of Thai life. Related to this is the Thai sensitivity to the intentions of others, particularly to the possibility that others may want to do them in. In order to come out on top the Thai sees the ends

as justifying the means. Here some of her most perceptive writing deals with the Thai enjoyment of life, merit-making, and male dominance.

One of Thailand's most famous men of letters is M.R. Khukrit Pramoj, a publisher, editor and lecturer. His most popular work is *Pan-haa Pra-cam-wan*, or Problems of Daily Life (1952), a multi-volume set of dialogues in which he answers questions about problems of daily living with an Ann Landers-type format.

Possibly the most comprehensive and analytically-oriented looks at the Thai personality is given us in the Cornell Thailand Handbook:

> ..The psychologist commented that the Thai in general were hospitable people; that the tempo of their lives was slow; that they possessed considerable equanimity; that many Thai actions had a basis in the Buddhist religion; that the Thai respected age; that ritual and ceremony were important facts of Thai life; that the Thai were not steadfast; that they were extravagant; that they were bashful, introverted; that they were not socially minded, that they were not joiners; that the Thai approach to life's concerns were empirical rather than theoretical; that the Thai were indolent; that they were egoistic, self-centered; that they lacked persistence, "stick-to-itiveness"; and that the Thai were a mild people, a non-violent people (Sharp 1956).

This is not simply a list of cultural stereotypes but is basically in accord with what most observers have written about the Thai in general. Another important aspect of this work is its explanation of various Thai words connected with attitudes for which there are no easy equivalents in English. Included are concepts like *kreng-chaj* (the attitude of humility involving the desire of not

having people trouble themselves); *choej-choej* (an attitude of indifference or noninvolvement); and *maj pen raj* (literally, "never mind' or "it doesn't matter"; used to relax in a stress situation or to pass off difficulties in life.

Shared Images of Thai Modal Personality Held by Peasants in a Central Plain Community (Textor, 1956), contains a listing of twelve images that Thais have of themselves in general: "Buddhistness (to be Buddha-like), Easy-Goingness, Fun-Lovingness, Generosity, Untrustworthiness, Self-Centeredness, Tolerance-Indifference, Hierarchy, Fast-Embarrassedness, Politeness, Unobtrusiveness, Lack of Efficiency and Progress."

The Simple One: The Story of a Siamese Girlhood (Tirabutana, 1958), provides what is probably the most unique psychological document in the English language. It is a life history, being non-analytic and descriptive. It does, however, present in an ingenuous way what it is to feel and think like a Thai.

Of a somewhat different order is *Som-bad Khong Phuu Dii* or Characteristics of a Good Person (Ministry of Education, 1959). This is a pamphlet used in schools for instruction in morality. Almost all Thai children are familiar with it. Following are some of its "commandments" selected at random from the first few pages of the text:

1) Do not touch and person in a disrespectful way.
2) Do not try to act in the same way as your superior.
3) Do not be concerned with your own comfort.
4) The good person is one who tries to behave in an honest way.
5) Do not shove anything at anybody or throw anything at anybody.
6) Do not make loud noises when people are working.
7) Do not spit or yawn in public.
8) Do not gobble your food or scatter things on your plate or chew loudly.

9) Do not sit or walk carelessly against other people.

10) Do not touch people who are your close friends.

11) If you are a superior, wherever you go, you should look after the comfort of your inferior.

Although the last point is self-explanatory, note should be taken of the cultural emphasis found in many of the items. There is a stress on self-discipline along with the fear of losing control over oneself. There is a stress on respecting the individual and a great emphasis given to the body in social relations. All of these items are standards for behavior.

Village Life in Modern Thailand (deYoung, 1963) presents a descriptive account of the daily activities in a Thai village. Although it was written over thirty-five years ago it still portrays an accurate picture of how villagers work in present-day Thailand, how their life has changed, and points out some of the possibilities for their future. Mr. deYoung shows how the old Thai basic patterns of life (religion, agriculture, social life) remain secure and strong. Thai rural society is shown to emit very few of the signs of disintegration that arise when a group is quickly thrown into the modernization process.

Thai Peasant Personality (Phillips, 1965) was the first book-length study of Thai psychological life. In it he described the Thai's dominant personality traits being aimed at the maintenance of their individuality, privacy and sense of self-regard. Philips tried to demonstrate how the individualistic tendencies of the Thai hinder interpersonal relationships. This loosely structured system of social relationships has its roots in childhood and is supported by Buddhist doctrine and the sociologically simple nature of Thai society.

Basic Thai values were developed in a rural society, but have been upheld by the urban population. People should be modest, respectful to elders and superiors, generous, hospitable, self-reliant, moderate, and serene. Peacefulness,

mildness and non-aggression are important personal values. One may be educated, industrious, and generous, but is not a good person unless s/he is peaceful.

The Thais have an almost uncanny ability to assimilate those living in their midst. This has led to a fairly homogeneous society despite many tribal groupings in the North, the Chinese in the cities, and the Malays in the South. Thais have a deep loyalty to the Crown and a sense of membership in the nation state, and almost all are Theravada Buddhists. They have a concept of the good life that stresses fun, physical comfort and security, intellectual simplicity, practicality and a moral (as contrasted with the natural) ordering of the universe.

People tend to avoid unhappy or emotionally charged situations. To be cool-hearted and uninvolved are general Thai values, along with the contrasting but not conflicting Buddhist virtues of emphatic joy, loving kindness, and compassion for others. Unlike the Japanese or New England Puritans, work is not seen as good in itself. Pleasure and enjoyment are the important characteristics. Obligations are recognized, but are not supposed to burden the individual unduly. The culture gives great importance to the individual and his/her right to act as s/he sees fit.

The Thai family structure is of great importance in the society. It has been characterized by many sociologists as being a loosely structured family in which members are added or leave at any time. Some children wander from place to place spending their childhood with several different families. Many children are sent to Bangkok for schooling, and it is not uncommon for a husband or wife to leave for several months to work in another part of the country.

The psychological and motivational effects of this type of family life cannot be underestimated. With the looseness of the family structure there are some instances of poor care, exploitation, rejection by foster parents, deprivation

of education, and a lack of secure roots. The breakdown of traditional patterns of care for needy relatives and friends tends to throw the needy on their own and increases dependence on the state. Problems face the Thai family, many of which are due to pressures of modernization. The increased cost of living creates new tensions. The old ways of child rearing and mate selection are being challenged, and all the problems of the rural person in an urban environment cause new marital difficulties. Rapid social changes have produced strains between the generations. The young have a different outlook and different expectations. The old, due to their traditional authority, tend to dominate, and when the young see this coming from persons inferior to themselves in certain respects, tensions and conflicts arise. These conflicts tend to arise more often in lower class youth who are upwardly mobile, and whose parents are, in general, more traditional in outlook.

Thai children are seldom seen crying or acting up. The adult Thai's lack of resourcefulness, inventiveness, and ability to think and reason independently has been attributed by some authorities to the child's lack opportunity to develop his own interests and skills. The village child is anything but a *tabula rasa* at birth. S/he enters the world with a stock of merit or demerits from previous lives, which will affect his/her being in this life. A child can be taught virtue and good habits, but prenatal characteristics are the basic determinants of life.

When it comes to education the overseas degree is of great value and attending the best university in Thailand is of real importance, perhaps more important to many than what is actually learned. It is the symbol, which is important. The Thais lack the aggressiveness of some of the other Asian cultures, and this may be due in part to their national heritage of many centuries with no colonial experience to make them lose confidence in themselves. This self-confidence has been an important factor in the ability of the Thais to assimilate the large Chinese population.

Formal Civic Development: The Thai Educational System

The Thai educational system has been operating for over seven hundred years. Any similarity between Thailand and Western countries has gone through a much older traditional system starting with Buddhist temples. It has taken little more than the last one hundred years to change from its traditional temple form to the system that is known today. From the 1820's to the 1920's a transition was made from informal temple teaching (by Buddhist monks) to a standard education under the supervision of a centralized educational system. It is fascinating to note, however, that over a fifth of Thailand's primary schools are still situated in Buddhist monasteries (Watson, 1980).

A need to preserve the past and the recognition to plan for the future saw kings like Nangklao, Mongkut, Chulalongkorn and Wachirawut build schools where students learned manners of the court as well as how to be provincial administrators. Teachers, as a result of their commitment to not only reading and writing but also how to be a good person, were regarded as *Buchaneeyabukala*, a person worthy of veneration. As the early teachers were monks practicing Dhamma (the way of Buddha), who not only imparted knowledge but gave spiritual guidance and provided a home and protection for the learner, their students returned in kind by serving them and showing proper respect. The manners and social conduct of these teachers were the models the students, therefore, tried to copy. Education as pursued within the Buddhist spiritual and philosophical framework was built on the fertility of the land, deep devotion to the Monarchy and was consistent with Thai Buddhist concepts of kinship that helped lead to an overall degree of a feeling of peace and happiness. As the Thais are fond of saying, "If there is rice in the field and fish in the water all is right with the world." Mass education and universal compulsory education came to be based on a traditional foundation of education first found in these monasteries (Bunnag, 1970). The year 1893 marked the 700th anniversary of the invention of

the Thai alphabet. Today literacy is no longer a privilege granted to a few but is considered a basic right of every Thai.

All educational activities can be seen as being responsive to national policy. This policy is wide-ranging and recognizes that the State has the sole responsibility for its implementation. Compulsory education is to be universal, free, and support literacy for all citizens. National Development Plans clearly outlined attitudes and beliefs for schools. The following examples come from the Third Plan (1972-76):

1) Power belongs to the people as a whole and not to any individual alone.
2) Power which is not ethical, or which is derived from corrupt practices will not be accepted.
3) Faith in a religion rather than a false belief is desirable.
4) The habit of frugality must be cultivated.

Under the National Education Charter approved by the National Education Commission in 1977, education was conceived as a continuing life-long process, which promotes the quality of life of Thai citizens, enabling them to live a useful life in society. Higher education institutes are given academic freedom provided that they do not go against the policy, work-plan and programs of the country and provided that they operate under the State's supervision and within the framework of relevant legislation. That legislation, for example, (as embodied in the Fifth Educational Development Plan of 1982-86) clearly provided for the improvement, adjustment and modification of the content and substance of academic, professional and moral courses as found in the curricula of primary, secondary, vocational, teacher training and non-formal education.

Looking at selected statements embodied in the elementary school curriculum of 1978 can easily see national support for civic development. Some of them include:

1) Awareness of one's rights and responsibilities;
2) Obtain practical experiences of good citizenry with the Monarch as the Head of State;
3) Recognition of the importance of living together peacefully in a family, in a community, and in a society;
4) Awareness of the value of being free, and taking pride in having been born on Thai soil.
5) Desirable qualities: Self-sacrifice and unselfishness, self-discipline and perseverance, diligence, honesty, frugality and endurance, tolerance of criticism and respect for individuals, sportsmanship and esteem for others, participation, cooperation and leadership.
6) Peaceful life: Understanding and having faith in one's professed religion, and applying its precepts in daily life and ;
7) Knowing how to solve problems by peaceful means. (APEID, 1984).

The elementary and secondary school curriculums are meant for all children and aim at building national unity. They must contain learning experiences that include the Thai language, life experiences for the purpose of survival and leading a good life, character development and work-oriented experience. In communities where the majority of the population is non-Buddhist, the teaching of religious practices other than those advocated in Buddhism is quite possible but the program is subject to the approval of the Regional Education Officer.

The government also instituted parallel policies for non-formal education. It sought to promote and encourage the mass media to take a role in spreading occupational knowledge, beneficial to the livelihood of the public and to transmit proper traditional values attitudes as well as language, arts, culture and morality, all of which constitute the background for social, economic and political development (NESDB, 1981).

Formal Civic Development Through Teacher Education

The Thai system of teacher education dates back more than one hundred years to the time of King Chulalongkorn. As more teachers were needed a Ministry of Education was established and by 1928 twenty-five schools were in operation. There are now thirty-six teacher colleges evenly distributed geographically and population-wise. These colleges have gone through a recent change making them more comprehensive universities. There is now one university for every two provinces in Thailand.

The thread of civic development also runs through the objectives of the Ministry of Education. Selected aims published by the Department of Teacher Education during the Sixth National Economic and Social Development Plan illustrate this support. Examples of policy include:

1) The Department will produce graduates of quality and good morals who are able to adjust themselves to economic and social changes.
2) The Department will promote the study, preservation, development, and dissemination of Thai culture, local and national.
3) The Department will encourage the management of institutional environments to enhance students' self-development, and also to motivate the students to participate in co-curricular activities.
4) The curriculum will contain general education courses aimed at

preparing students to become good citizens, to be able to earn their living peacefully, and to be able to create jobs themselves (Ministry of Education, 1985).

Summary

Where does this all take us? Thailand has had an obviously strong history of education. It has also had an overriding concern for moral development based upon its Buddhist principles. It might well be argued that these principles are not now seen primarily as religious but rather as a way of life. The public documents, principles, tenants, aims, etc. that have been enumerated here are actually carried out in practice in classrooms throughout the country. It will be interesting to follow their path as more and more Western approaches and ideas are implemented within the educational system. The Buddhist emphasis on the individual and the traditional acceptance of a hierarchical social structure might well come in conflict with our Western intellectual curiosity and social mobility. This system may become out of touch with the rural population as the educational system that services it strays from its traditional roots. The Thai *response "maj pen raj"* (it doesn't matter) may no longer be sufficient when dealing with the new realities of civic education within its society.

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